

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

ABORTION

The Abortion Problem: Proceedings of the conference held under the auspices of the National Committee on Maternal Health, Inc., at the New York Academy of Medicine. June 1942. Baltimore, 1944. Williams and Wilkins. Pp. xiii + 182. No price stated.

ONLY a committee of experts could produce an adequate criticism of *The Abortion Problem*. This imaginary review committee would have to include statisticians, gynaecologists, research workers in the field of human fertility, sociologists, lawyers and as an American song puts it, lots more. For this book records the knowledge and opinions of the experts from many professions who attended the conference on the abortion problem in America convened by the National Committee on Maternal Health in June 1942. It will be an essential reference book for all who are interested in this problem, while the ordinary reader will find the discussions that follow each paper particularly stimulating and revealing.

The first section of this book considers the magnitude of the abortion problem in America. Dr. Halbert L. Dunn, Chief Statistician for Vital Statistics, Bureau of the Census, states that in 1940, the total estimated abortions were 332,329 and that the number of deaths from abortion were "between 3,000 and 4,000, which probably constitutes about 30 to 35 per cent of maternal deaths from all causes." He concludes, "abortion is evidently still one of the greatest problems to be met in lowering further the maternal mortality rate for the country."

Professor P. K. Whelpton prefers the figure of 415,000 abortions in the United States in 1940, and, using data from the Indianapolis study of the factors affecting fertility, he considers the effect of abortion on the birth-rate and on population. The

discussion that follows emphasizes the difficulties of securing reliable statistics and underlines the necessity for a better definition of abortion.

Dr. Frederick J. Taussig examines the effects of abortion on the general health and reproductive functions of the individual, giving detailed figures from Russia and Germany. This paper provokes a lively discussion during which Dr. Robert L. Dickinson outlines a vigorous programme of action.

In the second section of the book, Dr. George L. Streeter, Dr. Earl T. Engle and Dr. Philip Levine consider respectively embryological defects, hormonal disturbances and serological factors in relationship to spontaneous abortion and its prevention.

Finally, the social, moral and economic causes of abortion are considered and suggestions made for dealing with them. The "crucial philosophical and religious problem" is raised, but more discussion of these aspects would have added to the value of the book. Judge Anna Kross of New York and Mr. John Harlan Amen, the Assistant Attorney-General of the State of New York, both describe the legal difficulties in tackling the problem and ask for the help of the medical profession. One speaker puts her finger on a weakness of this section when she asks "Is it not, therefore, a proper function of an educational group, such as this, to stop this spinning wheel of 'passing the buck'?"

I would like to have heard here the voices of thoughtful representatives of ordinary women. I do not think they would have let go by, unquestioned, Dr. Herman N. Bundesen's suggestion for making pregnancy reportable. And, because for ordinary women the problem is so often very real and personal, they might have helped, in Judge Kross's words, to "evaluate the abortion problem from its fundamental standpoint." She seems to have been right in pointing out that this conference did not decide where the evil lies; there was no answer to her challenge: "If you are not fundamentally

decided, once and for all, on whether abortion is essential from a medical standpoint, you will get nowhere. After that decision you must decide what kind of laws can protect the decent citizen and the decent practitioner. The problem we are after from the national standpoint, is criminal abortion."

But this challenge can only be met by co-operation between all the technical experts and an informed public opinion. The final resolutions of the conference show a full awareness of the need for more facts and more public discussion of the abortion problem. The publishing of this book will certainly forward both these aims and should stimulate thought and discussion in this country as well as in America.

RACHEL CONRAD.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Desai, Sapur Faredun. *A Community at the Cross-road.* Bombay, 1948. New Book Co. Pp. 201. Price Rs.10.

THIS book is about the Parsis of India, of whom in 1941 there were 114,890 according to census figures quoted by the author. Fewer, that is, than the population of Brighton. They came as a refugee people from Persia "more than a thousand years ago" and settled in India, particularly in Bombay, where they are many and active still. Of the Parsi, Desai says: "Numerically he is the tiniest, yet highly intelligent minority not only in India but in the whole world. Socio-biologically this community is a wonder" because it has been able to "remain intact after a lapse of some 30-40 generations in contact with an equally great civilization if not greater."

At the root of the life of the community is its religion, Zoroastrianism, with its three great principles of Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds; Robert Ballou has pointed out* that this might have become the religion of Europe if the advance of the Persian Empire had not been halted at Marathon and Salamis.

* Ballou, Robert O. (Ed.). *Pocket World Bible.* Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Desai gives the historical and religious background and speaks of the need to preserve "The Heritage that is Parsi" from the disintegrative influence of the present day.

His study however is mainly socio-biological. He writes vividly and with enthusiasm; he gives a wealth of quotations and figures from his wide reading in support of his theme. (There are 58 statistical tables and 8 figures, including a "logistic curve of Parsi population" which is shown as frontispiece.) He casts his net in all directions and gathers in fish and fowl and—it must be admitted—a number of red herrings. For some of his figures are as he says himself "in no way reliable"; some of his theories based upon calculations which "may not be true." Yet he deserves credit for his frankness in these statements, and he has given much material for thought and much that is picturesque and striking.

The dynamics of population are discussed, and that decline in fertility which is one of the main points of concern. In relation thereto the author considers the structure of Parsi society; the marriage age; the pressure of poor housing, malnutrition, disease and poverty upon a large proportion of the people. He stresses the need for the help and effort of responsible Parsis, for the good of the whole. Eugenic measures to meet the situation are proposed in Chapter VIII. Here he suggests that "intelligent persons . . . must undertake parenthood responsibility personally . . . measures . . . must be undertaken to ensure a happy married life to the fit and able population . . . there should be . . . no bar . . . in the way of the marriage and procreation of the intellectuals, and society should try to avoid bad blood (by segregation of defectives . . . sterilization . . . education)." "A Family Relations Institute is a necessity." "To have talent uniformly distributed . . . assortative or selective mating should be discouraged." There should be "help for eugenical marriage" and "restriction of unwanted children." General social improvements are also suggested. An appendix gives "A schedule for the study of fertility